Embodied Vocabulary Explanation in ESL Group Interaction:
A Preliminary Account

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In recent decades, the study of language learners' embodied behavior amongst themselves has gained much currency. Broadly speaking, a wealth of studies on learner gestures connect gestures with second language acquisition, and have shown that gestures play a role in facilitating communication, acquisition, and retention (Gullberg, 1998, 2011, 2014; McCafferty, 2004; McCafferty & Gullberg, 2008; Stam & McCafferty, 2008). Another line of research examines learner gestures through the lens of sociocultural theory, and has found that learners use gestures to rehearse new knowledge and to self-regulate (Lee, 2008; McCafferty, 1998; Negueruela & Lantolf, 2008; Platt & Brooks, 2008). These studies, however, adopted experimental designs as a research method, and therefore, *how* learners actually use gestures when interacting with one another *in situ* remains largely a "black box."

To this end, a growing number of research on learner gesture now adopts a conversation analytic perspective, which focuses on uncovering *members' method* by analyzing naturally occurring classroom data (Olsher, 2004; 2008; Mori & Hayashi, 2006). Continuing this line of research, this paper aims to provide a preliminary account of how learners employ gestures to do vocabulary explanation in the context of group work.

Data for this paper were collected from an intermediate ESL class offered by a private university in the East coast. One video camera and an audio recorder were placed in the classroom to capture the interaction of one particular student group with three students: Fiza from Saudi Arabia, Hoon from Korea, and Ling from China. The interaction of a particular task-based group activity was transcribed according to the Jefferson (2004) system. In reviewing the video and the transcript, several instances where gestures play a key role in restoring intersubjectivity that was jeopardized by non-understanding of vocabulary were identified.

In Extract 1, Fiza, Hoon and Ling are engaging in a task that requires them to plan a tour for a friend who is visiting New York. Prior to the extract, the group has discussed several tourist spots to visit. Fiza and Hoon have just suggested going to the Statue of Liberty, but Ling does not know what the phrase means. As a result of Ling's non-understanding, the group is locked in a conversational impasse:

[Excerpt 1: Statue of "Liverty"]

1	F:	it's (>statue of liberty<)
2	L:	where?
3	F:	statue of liberty.
4	H:	statue of liverty.
5	L:	.hh where? I never heard of it.
6	H:	statue of liberty.
7		(0.2)
8	→	((*raises her right hand as if she was* (**(Fig. 2)**)
9	→	*holding a torch*)).

10	L:		$oh:::$ heh heh [heh heh heh.]
11	All:		[heh heh heh.]
12			(0.7)
13	F:		heh heh heh ((*imitating spikes*))-yes
14	H:		°yeah statue of liverty. °
15	F:		Ling,
16		→	((*hands to forehead and fingers outstretched* **((Fig. 3))**
17		→	*imitating spikes*))
18	All:		HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH
19	L:		((*imitating spikes*))-(0.5)
20	L:	→	$give me another hand.$ ((*touches Fiza's hand*))
21	H:		yeah. heh heh heh.
22	G:		[give me another hand.]
23	H:		[yeah. one more hand.]
24		→	((*Fiza joins Ling in imitating spikes*)) **((Fig. 4))**

Fig. 2. Excerpt 1, lines 8-9.

Fig. 3. Excerpt 1, lines 16-17.

Fig. 4. Excerpt 1, line 24

 The need for vocabulary explanation gradually surfaces in lines 1-6. Upon hearing Fiza's turn, "statue of liberty" in line 1, Ling initiates a repair, asking "where." In response, both Fiza and Hoon repeat the phrase in lines 3 and 4. Ling, however, redoes the repair again in line 5, stating explicitly that she has in fact never heard of the term. At this point of the interaction, a gap in Ling's vocabulary knowledge is now brought to light, and the progressivity of the discussion is stalled.

Realizing that Ling has never heard of the "Statue of Liberty," Fiza animates the statue by mimicking holding a torch in lines 8-9. Upon seeing the "iconic gesture" (McNeill, 1992), Ling utters "oh" in line 10, where the vowel is drawn out, which is then followed by some laugh tokens. The combination of Ling's "oh" and her laugh tokens in line 10 not only indexes Ling's understanding of the referent of the phrase, but they also invite Hoon and Fiza to laugh, and in turn spark a ripple of joint laughter in the group. Note that the joint laughter cues a change in footing from serious to non-serious. The change of footing is subsequently developed by Fiza, who invokes a play frame by mimicking the spikes of the crown of the statue in lines 13-14 (Fig. 3). Ling imitates Fiza in line 19, and in line 20, invites Fiza to lend her more fingers to fully mime the spikes of the crown.

Thus far, I have shown that iconic gestures can be used to illustrate a lexical item and to provide resource for humor. In Extract 2, iconic gestures are also used as vocabulary explanation. While in Extract 1 I show how the entire group helps one member understand a

phrase, in Extract 2, one group member makes painstaking effort to help the rest of his group understand a word. This group is also comprised of three students: Fatimah from Saudi Arabia, Xixi from China, and Jeong from Korea. Prior to Extract 2, the class has just finished discussing an article on the psychology of altruism. The class has now moved on to some open-ended post-reading questions on the textbook. The group is sharing their views on factors that might make someone choose to help or not to help a stranger. Jeong is explaining that religions such as Catholicism advocate helping strangers. However, communication has been stalled even before he finishes the explanation as his group has trouble recognizing the word "Catholic."

[Excerpt 2: Christian or Catholic]

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1      J:              uh:: (.) if you are: sinser-((he means "sincere"))
2                      reli- sinser:: catholic
3      X:              ((shakes head slightly))
4      J:              [sinser catholic. if you're sinser:: catholic,]
5      X:              [              ((shakes head))              ]
6      F:              [      ((gaze to X and then shift gaze back to J))    ]
7      J:                                 [ it    ]
8      X:              ((leads forward))-[what] is sinser cat[holic    ]
9      J:                                                      [catholic.]
10                     ((gaze to X, arms stretched))-catholic. if you
11                     are catholic. catholic. catholic no? if you're
12                     christian. christian.
14     X:              ((shakes head and shifts gaze to Fatima))
15     F:              religion?=
16     J:              =christian-((gaze to F))
17     F:              religion?
18     J:              yes. Jesus.
19     X:              huh?
20     J:              Jesus. do you know Jesus?
21     X & F:          ((shakes head))-no.
22     J:              ((gaze to X))-$NO?$
23                     ((gaze away))-(Jesus).
24     F:      00:25   do it.
25     J:      →       just to uh:::: ((gaze away to the side and then
26             →       making a "cross" with his arms)). tsk.          ((Fig. 6))
27     X:              ((smiles and looks puzzled))
28     J:              no?
29     F:      →       this? ((draws a cross on her textbook))      ((Fig. 7))
30             →       ((Xixi gaze to F's drawing))
31     J:              um religion.
32     X:              ((nods))-OH [oh oh. ((move her hands))                ]
33     J:      →            [((gaze to and points at F's drawings))-yes yes.]
34                     it's christian or catholic.
35     X:              okay.
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36   J: 00:40   yes in: the bible. in bible. golden rule. golden
37   rule.
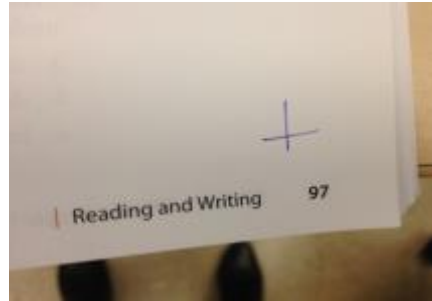

Fig. 6. Excerpt 2, line 25-26

Fig. 7. Excerpt 2, line 29

 Xixi and Fatimah's trouble in understanding the word "Catholic" surfaces as early as line 2. After Jeong's turn in line 1, Xixi shakes her head slightly to show a lack of understanding in line 2, while Fatimah does not show any uptake or recognition. Jeong, aware of their non-understanding, repeats his turn in line 4, but in Xixi and Faitmah's next turns in line 5 and 6, Xixi shakes her head while Fatimah shifts her gaze to Xixi, signaling that both Xixi and Fatimah still do not understand Jeong's idea. In line 8, Xixi explicitly vocalizes her trouble, leaning forward and asking Jeong "what is sinser Catholic." In response to Xixi's question, J repeats the word "Catholic" multiple times in lines 9-11, but the repetition does not help Xixi and Fatimah recognize the religion that he is talking about. Jeong then aborts "Catholic" and substitutes it with a close synonym "Christian" in line 12, but Xixi's embodied behavior of shaking her head and shifting her gaze to Fatimah shows that she remains confused.

        A small breakthrough happens in lines 15-18, where Fatimah proposes her candidate understanding 'religion' in a rising intonation in lines 15 and 17, which successfully narrows down the scope of their guesses to 'religion'; yet, when Jeong provides another relevant lexical item "Jesus" in line 18 and 20, both Fatimah and Xixi again signal non-understanding in lines 21-22. As Jeong gazes away, Fatimah, realizing that Jeong has possibly exhausted all of his verbal resources, initiates a directive "do it" in line 24, prompting Jeong to resort to embodied resources. In response, Jeong uses his arms to mimic a 'cross' (Fig. 6), an iconic gesture that symbolizes Christianity. Fatimah tests her candidate understanding of Jeong's gesture by drawing a cross on her textbook (fig. 7) and asks Jeong to confirm if her guess is right. When Xixi sees Fatimah's drawing in line 30, she utters three consecutive "oh's." Jeong, on the other hand, confirms that Fatimah has successfully guessed the religion that he has been describing.

         Considering the two episodes of embodied vocabulary explanation, there are a few observations to note. Firstly, embodied vocabulary explanation is occasioned by non-understanding that has stalled the progressivity of the group discussion, and are therefore used as a means to execute repair of such non-understanding. Sequentially, it functions as a last resort for repair after multiple attempts of verbal repair such as repetitions and use of synonyms do not seem to work. Secondly, this type of embodied vocabulary teaching is not coupled with speech, which is markedly different from that of teacher's vocabulary teaching, where explanatory talk and gestures often happen concurrently (Waring, Creider, & Box, 2013).

        As a final note to this paper, instead of viewing language learners as deficient in their

ability to communicate, a multimodal approach to studying learner interaction sheds light on their ingenuity in managing interaction. Importantly, by studying peer interaction in its own right, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the role of peer assistance in language learning.

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